The basic unit of the Chinese language is the zi (字), i.e. a Chinese word. Each zi has a written form (called a character, made up of strokes), a sound (made up of consonant and vowel) and a meaning (or multiple meanings). When we speak or write Chinese, we string zi together to form terms, phrases and sentences.

In Putonghua (the spoken form of Modern Standard Chinese) each zi is pronounced in one of four tones:

1st tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged

2nd tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high

3rd tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high

4th tone: 4 = diacritical mark \ pitch: 5 to 1, highest to lowest

To pronounce each zi below, follow its pinyin and the given tone number. Light-sound words, which have no definite pitch, carry no diacritical mark and are marked by 0.

This week: Words about hair

飾 (radical 食 shi2, eat/feed) means 裝飾 (zhuang1 shi4 = deck-up-decorate), 飾物 (shi4 wu4 = decorative-items/jewelry). Actor 飾演 (shi4 yan3 = deck-up-act = plays) role. 聖誕燈飾 (sheng4 dan4 deng1 shi4 = holy-birth-lamp-decorations) = Christmas lighting.

修飾 (xiu1 shi4 = trim-decorate = grooming) can 掩飾 (yan3 shi4 = cover-decorate = cover up) physical defects. Women wear 首飾 (shou3 shi4 = head-embellishment = jewelry): 飾針 (shi4 jin1 = decorative-pin = brooch), 髮飾 (fa3 shi4 = hair-décor).

嬌飾 (jiao3 shi4 = distort-cover-up) describes pretentious words/actions. Dictator hires media to 文過飾非 (wen2 guo4 shi4 fei2 = adorn-fault-decorate-wrong = gloss over mistakes/crimes), 粉飾太平 (fen3 shi4 tai4 ping2 = powder/stucco-cover-up-ultimate-peace = give whitewash to troubled society).

by Diana Yue